DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 378 CS 213 835

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TITLE Racing Towards Academic Literacy: BMWs, Tollways, and Bridges.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Autobiographies; Comparative Analysis; Higher Education; *Literacy; *Student Attitudes; *Student Experience; *Teacher Attitudes; *Writing (Composition); Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; *Literacy as a Social Process; University of Minnesota

ABSTRACT

Two composition instructors assigned literacy autobiographies to their students, in the same way the instructors had received such assignments when they were students in a graduate seminar on literacy. One instructor taught at the University of Minnesota's General College (an open admission college), and the other instructor taught in the University's College of Liberal Arts. The instructors compared the literacy autobiographies of their students to those of the seminar members. The instructors expected to find that all the autobiographies would indicate that building a bridge between personal literacies and that of the academy would be difficult, but ultimately valuable. Most of the seminar members described a much more intimate, personal relationship with literacy-related activities than the undergraduate students. The process of bridging the gap between personal and academic literacy was easy for most of the seminar members. Although many of the students tried to mirror the sunny descriptions of literacy found in the seminar members' literacy autobiographies, the students' literacy autobiographies suggested that becoming academically literate was a Faustian bargain, in which they must surrender themselves to the "BMW" that is academic literacy and lose their own identity. The undergraduate students seemed to be neither connected to, nor comfortable with, academic literacy and saw no way to connect it with their personal literacies. As "successful" students, it is the responsibility of composition instructors to show their students that there is space for them to negotiate between personal and academic literacy. (RS)

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Racing Towards Academic Literacy: BMWs, Tollways, and Bridges

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Racing Towards Academic Literacy: BMWs, Tollways, and Bridges

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In the spring of 1992 we were enrolled in a graduate seminar on literacy taught by Chris Anson at the University of Minnesota. It was a class at variance with routine courses in graduate school -- it featured presentations by a different composition scholar each week, and almost all of the students in the class taught writing. Visitors included Deborah Brandt, Shirley Brice Heath, Robert Brooke, David Bartholomae, Andrea Lunsford, David Jolliffe, and James Berlin, among others. At the same time, both of us were also teaching composition courses at the University of Minnesota. One of us taught in General College, the University's open admission college, where students are generally ranked in the bottom one-third of their high school classes and are considered "basic writers." The other taught in the University's College of Liberal Arts, where students have met more criteria for "academic success."

Before Deborah Brandt arrived for our seminar, she asked us to write literacy autobiographies tracing our development as writers and readers by looking closely at how books, media, family, teachers, and life events shaped how and what we read and write. After reading the literacy autobiographies written by the graduate writing instructors, we realized how profoundly our experiences with literacy affected the way we learned. We began to wonder if the same held true for our students, and if so, what the differences were between our literacies and theirs. More importantly, if students' experiences were radically different, and if their literacy experiences had as marked an

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impact on their learning as ours did for us, how effective could our teaching be?

Since we had found writing literacy autobiographies to be thought-provoking, we decided to assign them in our classes. Neither of us was entirely comfortable doing this, because we were asking students to write about their personal literacies within an academic context, and we believe that academic literacy often works at variance with personal literacy. When we give an assignment, we ask students to interpret their experiences through our lenses. To some degree, we also ask them to use our discourse to describe those experiences. But since all discourse, including discourse about literacy, is ideological, we are potentially asking them to abandon the values and ideologies that accompany their own discourses and literacies in favor of the academy's. At the same time, the idea of literacy is also socially constructed. By asking student to write about their literacy, we are acting as agents for an academic ideology which wants to subsume their personal literacies. Implicit in this notion is the idea that literacy does not exist in a vacuum; it's the perception of others that one is literate that makes one literate. This isn't a new idea, it's been used by everyone from E.D. Hirsch, to Alan Bloom, to Benedict Anderson. But Hirsch and Bloom, certainly, don't acknowledge the political dimensions of the social construction of literacy. To be perceived as literate, one must participate in a discourse in which members share common meanings attached to the symbols--letters, words, numbers--used in it. If they don't they're illiterate. But those meanings aren't arbitrary. Theorists V.N. Volosinov and Raymond Williams have shown that they reflect the interests of various members of society and are usually allied with the dominant ideology. To be literate, then, people must not only use words correctly, they must share the ideology surrounding their meanings.

Nevertheless, we believed the potential of the assignment outweighed the drawbacks that our theory cautioned us against. We hoped that students would gain some insight into their own literacies discover some common connections with the literacy demanded by the academy, and provide us with some answers to the questions posed above.

After we gave our students their literacy autobiography assignment, in which we asked them to trace events in their lives that contributed to the development of their literacy. We suggested they think about specific instances, books, people, films, or other influences that were central to their literacy. We also asked them to consider including the influence of family members, schools and teachers, friends, characters (in books, movies, other sources), job experiences on their ideas about literacy and what literacy is.. After students completed their assignments, we compared autobiographies to ones written by our instructors colleagues. We expected to find that both instructors and students would define their inside and outside of school literacies differently; that all would find building a bridge between their personal literacies and that of the academy difficult, but ultimately valuable for a host of reasons. When we examined the literacy autobiographies of our fellow writing instructors, our hypotheses were borne out. The degree to which the process was painful varied, but all deemed it valuable in the end. Students, however, did not share this judgment.

Most of the writing instructors in our sample described a much more intimate, personal relationship with literacy-related activities than the students. Most celebrated the acts of reading and writing--reading, for instance, was often described as "pleasurable" and/or an escape from daily life. Elaine, for example, wrote that in her childhood "During the summer months, my greatest pleasure . . .was lying under the Tamarack tree in our

backyard on a blanket or on our front porch, reading." Most also described homes full of books and other reading material. Susan's description is typical:

> Our house was filled with diverse reading matter. My parents were lifetime subscribers to Reader's Digest, and my mother subscribed to women's magazines like Ladies Home Journal and McCall's. From time to time, my father subscribed to Fate, a magazine of the occult. I had my own subscriptions, and every month a Little Lulu comic book, neatly folded in half and wrapped in brown paper, arrived from Dell Publishing.

This familiarity with literacy outside of school bred an easy relationship with literacy inside of school. The process of bridging the gap between personal and academic literacy, for most of these instructors, was easy. Elizabeth, for example, said that she didn't remember becoming literate, she simply was literate. "I've heard the stories, seen the photos of me on their laps with the book I'm told was my favorite, Time for Bed, Toni." Language permeated her family's social gatherings, and she was exposed to literacy in the Latin masses she attended as a child. As a result of this exposure, her experiences with school were easy. She wrote about her experiences learning grammar:

> In fourth grade I first heard the word "noun." I thought words were just words. I had no idea that they were also building blocks with different functions, different capabilities. And that I could learn to manipulate them. This was going to be fun. I don't know too many people to whom I can say this, but I *loved* diagramming sentences! I loved the order of things, the logic of naming . . . Written language isn't merely about order. It's about magic.

Elizabeth's autobiography describes an education filled with wonder and pleasure. As a result of her literate upbringing, the transition to academia was relatively painless.

Kim describes a similarly smooth transition from outside-of-school literacy to that required inside of school. She describes a childhood spent with her mother, who worked at a local newspaper and wrote humorous stories on the side. Growing up around so much reading and writing, her relationship with literacy was easy. When Kim was sent to pre-school at age three, she realized that it could also be rewarding:

> Here the alphabet became a game and I became an adept player. I believe it was at Gustavus Adolphus preschool that I concretely connected reading with praise and learned to excel at it for more than just the obvious reward of being able to understand the world around me.

From pre-school, Kim describes an education in which "a quest for acceptance and admiration motivated both my reading and writing." She found a way to parlay her literacies together, designing greeting cards for friends and family. she went on to focus on her writing until, before graduate school, she worked in public relations. In almost every way, Kim's literacy autobiography is idyllic--her experiences with literacy outside of school made it easier for her to build the bridge to academic literacy, which in turn enriched her personal literacy all the more.

Kathleen, too, describes a smooth crossing over the bridge between outside and inside of school literacy. Like Susan and Kim, she grew up in a literate home.

> My earliest memories of books are unclear. . . . at home there were always books. . . . With a home environment that so readily supported reading and writing, these activities were not primarily linked with formal education and academics for me. However when I recall my favorite teachers throughout my education they invariably were my English teachers.

Her autobiography also reflects the kind of personal and academic growth that is supposed to result when that bridge is completed. She wrote speeches for

the class president in college, she represented her college at an intercollegiate poetry forum. After graduation, she worked as a science and literature teacher for the Peace Corps and also wrote a newsletter for other volunteers. Although she describes a somewhat rocky relationship with the idea of literacy, particularly after working in the Peace Corps, she has nonetheless benefited from the bridge between personal and academic literacy.

For most of the instructors in our seminar, although they may have perceived a gap between personal and academic literacies, it was relatively easy to bridge. Michael, for instance, wrote that outside of academia "The center of my writing activity is my journal, which I started keeping after high school. I have been at it for nearly eight years now and have generated about 40 spiral notebooks and hardcover blank books filled up with some 500 odd pages or so of philosophical ruminations, record keeping, parts of stories, poems, essays, ideas about this or that . . ." Michael asserts that he has a "contentious relationship with literacy," but he does not separate his personal literacy from his academic. He writes:

> Today, every aspect of my life involves writing in some way. I teach writing. I write for my graduate seminars. I write op/ed pieces for the Minnesota Daily. I write long letters and poems to my close friends and family, most whom live in far away places like New York, Chicago, Germany, and England. I leave notes for my housemates on the kitchen table or on their bedroom doors.

Yet, Michael's apparent ability to float from one genre to another does not hold up for all writing instructors. But even those who cite tension between their personal and academic literacies have found a way to bridge that gap. Several instructors who came from non-traditional academic backgrounds wrote compellingly of obstacles or of their difficulty writing academic discourse. Christina, for example, grew up in a working class and, as a result of poor eyesight, was classified as retarded by the third grade. She

was rescued from "the bench" where "slow" students sat when a Lyon's Club eye exam revealed that she needed glasses, but her rocky relationship with literacy had begun. It was compounded when she discovered in junior high school that her father was not Italian, as he had reported to his family, but half Cherokee. Further, he revealed that he could barely read and could not write at all. Furthermore, her school situation was disrupted by a temporary move from the city where she had been living to a rural town where literacy was even less valued:

> We lived with my grandfather's sister and her . . . husband. reading and writing were not realities. the language they spoke at home was a unique combination of Cherokee, English, French, and mountain. I was far advanced of the ancient books the county teachers used in the school and there was no library. There was only the Sears catalogue and the occasional Bible to read. If I was unable to borrow a neighbor's horse in bad weather, I didn't go to school.

After her return to the city, Christina excelled in school despite the fact that she could not even imagine a bridge between her complex personal literacy and the literacy of schooling. "I couldn't find myself in books; I couldn't find my father's family in books." She graduated and went to college, but left after two years because "All of my academic pursuits had been divorced from my life." Yet, in spite of her early experiences with literacy and schooling, Chris eventually found a way to build a bridge between her own literacy and the academy's. She began tending bar near two universities in the city where she lived, and there met professors who helped her construct a bridge between her personal literacy and the literacy of the academy.

> They shared books with me and I learned that they were real people with real problems. they showed me how the system worked, I suppose. It had never been a question of learning my studies, but it had been a question of learning the ropes. Education became less mystical. I completed a degree . . . at night. I started "doing" creative writing in my early thirties. Luckily, I had some early successes that

> prompted me to take another degree in Rhetoric and English. It then seemed logical to go to graduate school: The canon had been changing and I was seeing more parts of me in my academic work.

Christina's bridge between her own literacy and the academy was strong enough to bear the weight of her early experiences with literacy, during which she could not imagine constructing it. Like the other instructors of writing here, her experiences with literacy outside and inside of school enriched each other.

Ultimately, virtually all the instructors here help up the formal act of reading and writing as an empowering and valuable activity. Debby, for example, writes:

> I eat, breathe and sleep reading and writing. That's me. I have to remember than not everyone wants or needs that level of interest to have a happy, productive, life. . . . I don't wish on everyone the craving to be a writer. . . . [But] I would wish on everyone the joy I have found through books.

Comments like these, too, are typical. Sofia writes that "I cannot imagine a life without loving language--reading and writing and talking. It is this that I desire to communicate to students. I hope that they too will love to think and to desire to communicate that thought to others." If one idea runs through these instructors' literacy autobiographies, it is that they all want to help students construct a literacy which represents students' own interests, and the interests of the academy. They want to help students "invent the university" so that they can succeed within it.

We expected students' literacy autobiographies to reflect those of the instructors. We expected to read in them the same struggles with literacy and the same celebration and ultimate bridging of personal and academic literacy. Unfortunately, we were wrong. Although many tried to mirror our sunny descriptions of literacy found in the instructors' papers, we found that theirs

added a wrinkle to the picture. They suggest that their authors consider becoming academically literate something of a Faustian bargain, in which they must surrender themselves to the academy and lose their own identity. Even if students wrote about becoming academically literate as a laudable and necessary goal, they nonetheless described the process as painful. They often resisted developing parts of their papers that they thought didn't portray their literacy development in glowing terms, even when, in conferences and in small groups, they were encouraged to do so by instructors and peers. It was as if students believed they needed to reproduce a script they became successfully, painlessly comfortable with academic literacy. Stephen L. Fox, a composition reseacher at Indiana University, has also noticed the tendency of students to write about their literacy backgrounds in glowing terms and has compared their writing to Horatio Alger "rags to riches novels."

> Their literacy achievement has helped them earn admission into a major university; they can look forward to one day possessing a college degree that will confer a certain privileged status and enable them to enter the business or professional world with concomitant economic and social rewards (5).

Their papers don't suggest that they perceive the need for bridge-building between their two literacies. Instead, it's as if they "smell the leather" of the BMW that is academic literacy, meanwhile that BMW heads straight for them as them stand immobilized. Once hit, they become academically literate, but their personal literacies will be obliterated. In essence, students seemed to be neither connected to, nor comfortable with academic literacy and certainly saw no way to connect it with their personal literacies.

Aaron and Mike's literacy autobiographies suggest what we found in many students' papers--neither recognizes that they need to build this bridge between personal and academic literacy at all. Although they welcomed the

day when the speeding truck of academic literacy would hit them, they described it in terms which made it clear that it was unpleasant for them. For them, personal literacy was always much more significant than academic. For example, Aaron describes the year that he learned that "school wasn't for playing, it was about books."

> Ever since I was a little kid I have always been looking for thrills. I would do anything to get my adrenaline pumping. I can't live without it, and school just did not do it for me. I concentrated a lot of my learning outside of the classroom and in the real world, doing everything I could to gain knowledge about things I liked to do. It is much easier and more fun learning about things that interest you and things you like to do.

Outside of school, personal, literacy was about fun; inside, academic, literacy was about tedium.

> I was in eighth grade and I thought school was a real drag, so my friends and I were always looking for some kind of thrill. We lives about a half mile away from a bridge over a river, with railroad tracks on them. We would wait for the train to come, and see who could stay on the bridge the longest. Then we would jump off the bridge into the river, it was great.

For Aaron, school didn't provide the kind of excitement that death-defying stunts did; in fact, it didn't even hold his interest. But despite the fact that academic literacy is always cast in monotonous terms here, he says that he is prepared to surrender himself to it in college.

> Now I am in college, far from home and my friends, and I think that college is going to be a much better learning experience than high school. I feel that my learning for the most part has taken place outside the classroom and in the real world. I have enjoyed learning in the real world much more than in the classroom only because what I was taught in the classroom wasn't what I wanted to learn, and the knowledge I gained in the real world was what I wanted to learn.

The implication here is that away from home and friends, away from those who have been instrumental in developing his personal literacy, Aaron can

fade into academic literacy and let it consume him. Although he still describes learning in the "real world" as more fun and more valuable, he is hopeful that college will be a "much better learning experience than high school."

While some of the instructors described above had the same rocky relationship with literacy that Aaron has, none of them suggested that their academic success was based on their total surrender to academic literacy. All were able to bridge the gap between their personal literacies and the literacy of schooling. But Aaron describes no such bridge-building in his autobiography. He never explains why he thinks college will be a better learning experience than high school and gives no indication that he perceives academic literacy to be any more interesting than he did in his earlier school days. We can speculate as to the basis for his pronouncement--the myth that every new start is a fresh start; a belief that college is somehow more "flexible" than high school--but nevertheless, this autobiography suggests that Aaron is not only not building a bridge between his personal and academic literacy, he doesn't recognize that it needs to be there.

While Mike's autobiography also describes a process by which the author's personal literacy is consumed in an unpleasant process wherein he becomes more academically literate. As this process moves forward, however, he also suggests that he loses something of himself in the Faustian bargain. Mike introduces the notion of literacy as power when he describes his older siblings' literacy:

> Their literacy intrigued me because they had a "power" that I really didn't understand. I mean they could read and write almost anything and could understand what was going on and happening around them.

He says that as a result of their power, he became determined to learn to read and write.

Mike's first encounters with literacy are described here in glowing terms. He describes his pleasure when he finished an entire book by himself at the age of seven, and talks about the fun he had reading and writing in first grade. But as moves from grade to grade, his characterization of literacy changes from a joyful, celebratory one to one couched in the language of discipline and control. Although he says his literacy "progressed each year," he no longer enjoyed the kind of literacy demanded by school.

> School was forcing me to improve my literacy skills by the teacher assigning assignments that included reading and then writing about what you read and answering questions about it. In order to have a hope to go to college I had to get good grades and also to please my parents. So in order to get good grades I had to read a lot of books and write a lot of papers. At [my high school] we had to take four years of English which was good because this really helped my literacy improve. . . . So from my elementary years to my high school years my literacy had changed from reading for pleasure to reading for a grade. It is really bad that it happened like that . . .

This passage highlights the tension Mike felt around the gap between his personal literacy and the literacy demanded of him by school. Throughout his autobiography Mike acknowledges that he understands that if he bridges the gap, his "literacy"--the degree to which he successfully uses the framework supplied by schooling--will improve. But his writing is full of indications that this wasn't the "natural" process it's supposed to be. He says that school "was forcing" his literacy to improve; notes that he "had" to take four years of English in high school; states that school forced him to stop "reading for pleasure" and start "reading for a grade." Like Aaron, both the way that he frames these experiences and the discourse he uses to describe them indicates that Mike is willing to submit to academic literacy, but not that he believes he should bridge the gap between it and his own literacy.

Dennis, another GC student, also describes the process of becoming academically literate as a Faustian bargain. Outside of school, he learned about gender roles, family relationships, to read and write (in Spanish and English), how to play, and how to live. He says that his parents "taught me anything and everything and by far gave me a significant amount of contributions to my literacy and pushed me to go further. School, he said, was "the key to literacy. . . . where you learn everything possible to prepare you to function as a literate in this world." But the thing he most remembers contributing to his literacy throughout grade school were "discliplinary learning, authority, and conforming." Enrolled in parochial school, he became intimately familiar with the "board of education" administered by the nuns. He learned that to succeed in school, he had to surrender to the authority of his teachers and conform to their wishes. After grade school,

> high school and learning . . . was a whole new ballgame. . . . Learning more subjects, same subjects as before but harder, and more fears, more rules. For the most part it was survivable. . . . I found out that it was cool to be smart in highschool so that made me want to be more literate to be accepted and to compete mentally with my peers.

Dennis's paper describes the Faustian bargain in dramatic terms. Education was not only rule-bound, it was violent. He learned early that to succeed, he had to surrender his own literacy--the comfort and familiarity of knowledge imparted by his parents, bilingualism, even the athletic skills he learned from his father. He expects college to be "another shocker in way or the other" and suggests that he simply expects to continue surrendering pieces of his personal literacy in order to conform to the literacy of the academy.

Many of the more "academically successful" CLA students like Cindy wrote about how academic literacy had benefited their lives, pointing uncritically to the importance of their parent's guidance in their early

childhood, a key instructor, or the reading of sets of books. But often their personal literacies seemed to be undercut by the very things they cited as beneficial. For instance, Cindy wrote about how she liked kindergarten, but also commented that it "put an end to my family's conscious part of my literacy:

> [from] then on, Mom and Dad left the school responsible for my basic reading and writing. Not that they didn't want me to learn, they just had demanding full time jobs, leaving little time to do more than check our homework. I was put into a cement block room, and forced to learn the alphabet. No one tortured me, but they threatened to make me repeat Kindergarten if I didn't learn it this year. This continuous threat of repeating a grade pushed me through school for the first eight years.

Other students, while maintaining the importance of traditional academic literacy, wrote about experiences in high school and college English and writing courses that belied their approval of them. Erin confessed that "Just this last year, I was frustrated about a paper I was writing, I cried my eyes out. I cried so hard I felt sick to my stomach and started to gag. The reason is, I have a hard time writing papers." And Ryan, who writes poetry, short stories and music on his own time, wrote that his high school teachers "graded heavy on grammar and not so heavy on the style, content, or character" of his writing. Like their General College colleagues, these students do not perceive a bridge between their literacy and the academy's, quite the opposite. Although they do not acknowledge it, their writing indicates that transforming their personal literacies into academic literacy is painful.

The contrast between these literacy autobiographies, written by students, and those written by instructors are striking. If one idea runs throughout the instructors' literacy autobiographies, it is that they all want to help our students construct a literacy which represents their own interests,

and the interests of the academy. They want to help them "invent the university" so that they can succeed here. Yet, this desire is based on instructors' own experiences. While none of them drive BMWs, they are passengers in the BMW that is academic literacy. They have not had to enter the Faustian bargain that students describe because they have carved out a niche for themselves within the academy.

The question that remains to be answered is why: why are instructors' experiences with literacy so very different than those described by students? In some instances, instructors were simply raised in more privileged settings where literacy was more valued. But not all instructors were so fortunate; many overcame considerable obstacles to gain their footing in the academy. Perhaps one answer is that instructors believe they can use literacy to make their own place, their own statement, within the academy. But that begs the real question: how do writing teachers help students build a bridge between what they enjoy--personal literacy--and what they need to know to succeed here--academic literacy? How do we help them without devaluing that personal literacy in favor of academic discourse? And finally, should we? Are we correct in assuming that to succeed, students need to "invent the university?" Students' literacy autobiographies examined here demonstrate that students are hungry for academic literacy, but their reasons for wanting it are different than instructors'. In a sense, they want to enter the Faustian bargain. They want to be hit by the BMW, not think about the tradeoff critically. But as their papers show, this is the result of years of conditioning, of being told that their personal literacy was illegitimate and academic literacy legitimate. Our own experiences with literacy and the literacy autobiographies by instructors prove that success is found after the bridge between the personal and the academic is constructed and we learn to walk

back and forth as convention demands and as we desire. As successful students, it's our responsibility to manage the traffic, to show students that there is a space for them to negotiate between personal and academic literacy.